



Black Life, History,
and Culture

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“DETROIT WAS HEAVY”: MODERN JAZZ, BEBOP, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPRESSIVE CULTURE

Anthony Macías

Recognition of Detroit’s place in United States history has tended to range from the sensational, such as the two major racial explosions of 1943 and 1967, to the symbolic as in the case of the depression-era struggles of the United Auto Workers, or the 1970s-era deindustrialization. For African Americans in many U.S. cities, Detroit stands in for economic and social processes happening to them elsewhere. To be sure, Detroit has been the site of race riots and labor strikes, but African Americans’ participation in these episodes should be seen in the context of the city’s long, proud history of sheltering fugitives of the slave regime, educating the free black population, and producing employment, housing, and educational opportunities for southern black migrants and their children. In other words, conflict is not the only lens for viewing black Detroit; community is a powerful lens as well.¹ Within the history of Jazz, as historian Robin D. G. Kelley argues, there is “a general inability to recognize ‘community’—a musician’s community, a dancer’s community, an African American community, and various overlapping communities that make up the world of jazz.” Heeding Kelley’s reminder that “new ideas come out of collective work, improvisation, and competition, but also from musicians educating each other,” this essay focuses on a generational cohort of Jazz instrumentalists and vocalists who created a musically rigorous, but historically underappreciated Bebop scene in the 1940s and 1950s.² By continuing and expanding a tradition of communal values, sustained study, collective creativity, and improvisational individuality, these Detroit beboppers enriched and extended African American expressive culture and the world of music.

For the most part, Detroit enters African American cultural history through the entrepreneurial figure of Barry Gordy, his successful black capitalist enterprise, the Motown Record Company, and its slick, soulful “Sound of Young America.” As Suzanne Smith demonstrates, the signature Motown sound was tied both to the automobile industry, with the rhythms of the factory floor inspiring the beats of “Hitsville, U.S.A.,” and to the larger history of sacred Gospel and secular Blues music.³ In the matter of Jazz, however, Detroit is often passed by as scholars

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trace north-south itineraries from New Orleans to Kansas City and Chicago, and east-west circuits from New York to Los Angeles. Yet Detroit has something to tell us about Jazz as a communal, participatory art, just as Jazz has something to tell us about the quotidian experiences of black Detroit. Specifically, examining the rise of Bebop in Detroit sheds light on the intellectual character of working-class cultural production by African American creative personalities, musicians, artists, educators, mentors, and critics. In short, digging deeper into Jazz, rather than the Blues or Motown, yields new insights into Detroit, just as paying greater attention to Detroit expands the social geography of Jazz music, and reveals new facets of African American vernacular culture.

In a speech in 1941 Duke Ellington declared that African Americans had “recreated in America the desire for true democracy, freedom for all, the brotherhood of man, principles on which this country had been founded.” Eric Porter argued that Bebop musicians “refused” to play the entertainer role of “Uncle Tom,” and they sought “to escape the stereotypes and audience expectations of the past,” while maintaining an “aversion to musical boundaries.”⁴ The Bebop movement favored experimental small combos over commercial big bands in an industry that perpetuated an unfair racial differential in terms of musicians’ wages, employment opportunities, and critical accolades. As Amiri Baraka argued, “liberal” white music critics, acting as patronizing cultural gatekeepers by privileging bourgeois cultural norms, “descended on the new music with a fanatical fury.”⁵ Frank Kofsky saw “Jazz criticism as social control,” and “the Jazz revolution, in its social aspect,” as “an indictment of the very inequalities of class and race that have given these critics their privileged position.”⁶ Because the transgressive reappropriation and reinterpretation of the popular by Charlie “Bird” Parker and the other Bebop musicians reflected the more assertive attitude of younger African Americans, commentators “responded as though to a breach in the social order.”⁷ Indeed, because the Jazz modernists effectively bridged the artificial categories of highbrow and lowbrow, and even utilized non-Western traditions, they “were revolutionizing not only music, but also the concept of culture.”⁸

African American musicians blurred the lines between music business genres, and as Ted Gioia noted, Bebop “rebelled against the populist trappings of swing music” by increasing the technical difficulty and “harmonic complexity” of compositions, and by speeding up the tempo of the soloists’ “improvised lines.”⁹ Guthrie Ramsey contended that Bebop, like other black musical expressions since the 1940s, articulated an “Afro-modernism,” a response to the urbanization, industrialization, and “modernization of African American culture.” However, Ramsey specifies that “the ideal of artistic autonomy” and “a vibrant art discourse” granted Bebop “a kind of critical distance from” other postwar “race music,” like Blues, Gospel, and Jump Blues.¹⁰ Formal Jazz criticism eventually came around, but

the public perception and acceptance of Jazz as art rather than as primitivist escapism followed an uneven road to respectability, as the proper cultural venues included from symphonic concert settings and patron-sponsored festivals to college lecture halls.

Certainly New York City was Bebop's capital, incubating the new approach during the war years and catalyzing new developments thereafter. In contrast, Los Angeles was known for its Central Avenue swing scene during the war, and for its independent Rhythm 'n Blues labels after, yet it also supported boppin' modernists such as Dexter Gordon, Art Farmer, Hampton Hawes, and Sonny Criss, as well as a strong foundation of formal and informal music education, including the legendary teachers Lloyd Reese and Samuel Browne, and the advanced courses and student bands at Jefferson and Jordan high schools.¹¹ These visionary school music programs were on par with those at Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago, and the historically black public high schools Douglass, Manassas, and Booker T. Washington in Memphis, each of which treated Jazz as a serious discipline, emphasizing its theory and its practice. Detroit also generated two of the best high school music programs in the country.

Cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal noted that although Bebop was originally "largely developed beyond the grasp of the marketplace," its recording led to its "subsequent commodification." Neal argued that "hard-bop emerged in the mid-1950s as a form of modern Jazz with roots in the black working-class culture," and that by the end of the decade Bebop, "an organic black music form," had been "transformed from an urban dance music . . . into a concert music, appropriated by the mainstream cultural elite and later the academy."¹² "Hard Bop," in Samuel Floyd's definition, "was bop played with a Bluesy, funky delivery, with lots of forceful interaction between trumpet and drums, employing elements from Gospel and R&B." Many Detroit musicians are counted among the "chief exponents of the style," along the Hard Bop–Soul–Jazz spectrum.¹³ By the late 1950s, when formerly radical bop runs and chordal conventions became trite, African Americans created "free Jazz," which freed improvisers "from adhering to preset chord progressions," explored unorthodox, spontaneous melodies and tempos, and exhibited screeching, shrieking reed and brass, "combined with nonrepetitive, highly complex" bass and drum. By pushing "the conventional limits of tonality" in "longer, uninhibited, loosely structured, often disturbing performances," the free Jazz rebels ushered in an expanded musical palette and conceptual vocabulary during the black freedom struggle of the 1960s.¹⁴

The pianist Sun Ra gained prominence in Chicago's free Jazz scene, but he eventually recorded in New York City, as did pianist Cecil Taylor and saxophonists John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders, and Albert Ayler.¹⁵ Los Angeles produced the avant-garde musicians Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, Eric Dolphy, Charles Mingus,

Horace Tapscott, Ruben Leon, and Anthony Ortega, while Detroit also furnished eclectic performers, composers, and musicians' collectives as part of a national Black Arts Movement. As scholarly studies have demonstrated, African Americans' expressiveness and urge to show off, is enacted within a communal context where observers become participants, and where individual accomplishments elevate the entire group. The continuum of African American expressions, from the shuffling ring shout to the present, reflects an artistic aesthetic, "a set of techniques and practices," and an articulation of unifying, dignifying values, ethics, and beliefs that "has profoundly shaped American cultural life."¹⁶ By showing how Detroit musicians helped new forms of black music evolve and advance, this essay adds new evidence to further illuminate a critical period in African American cultural history.

CULTURE AND COMMUNITY IN THE DETROIT JAZZ SCENE

During the 1930s on the near east side of downtown, the area adjacent to the old "Black Bottom" neighborhood began to be called "Paradise Valley" as African Americans expanded northward from Gratiot Avenue. It was the heart and the "Soul" of the African American community, and due to segregation, African Americans were allowed to own businesses in this district only. As a result, Paradise Valley became the African American commercial and entertainment center, packed with black-owned shops, bars, gambling houses, nightclubs, and hotels, as well as groceries, drug stores, and law, dentist, and doctors' offices. When the touring big bands of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Bennie Moten played nearby cities, the hotels were for whites only so band buses would drive the musicians to Detroit for accommodations. These bandleaders would play the circuit of Paradise Valley venues on John R., "the Street of Music," and on Hastings Street, a vibrant strip of Blues and Jazz joints longer than Bourbon Street in New Orleans. After hours, the big band musicians of the day would mingle, and local players would test their mettle against visiting star soloists in cutting contests during all-night jam sessions.¹⁷

Between 1941 and 1943 over 100,000 African Americans moved to Detroit, now nicknamed "the Arsenal of Democracy" for its essential war industry production work. Over the previous decade the number of African Americans had doubled, but the wartime demographic influx, combined with discriminatory real estate practices, created a severe housing crisis, which led to small, contained race riots in February and April 1942 at the Sojourner Truth Homes, a federal housing project built specifically for African Americans. In addition, white-organized "hate strikes" against black defense workers, the deadly race riot of June 1943, and the postwar political battles over racially integrated low-income public housing and movement into all-white residential neighborhoods added to a bitter backdrop for

the generation of young Bebop musicians.¹⁸ Nevertheless, despite Detroit's often bleak racial and economic climate, its African American community created a supportive social, cultural, and intellectual environment for vibraphonist Milt "Bags" Jackson, guitarist Kenny Burrell, pianist Barry Harris, vocalist Betty "Bebop" Carter, pianist Tommy Flanagan, drummer Elvin Jones, tenor saxophonist Yusef Lateef, and the white members of this cohort: baritone saxophonist Park "Pepper" Adams and vocalist Sheila Jordan.

Born in 1920 in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Yusef Lateef arrived in Detroit at age five. Milt Jackson was born in Detroit in 1923 and came from a family whose "sanctified" church emphasized the transmission of an African American musical heritage. Jackson played guitar at age seven, piano at eleven, xylophone and vibraphone in his teens, and sang tenor in a touring Gospel quartet.¹⁹ Elvin Jones, born in 1927 in nearby Pontiac, Michigan, learned much from his older brothers, trumpeter Thaddeus "Thad" Jones and pianist Hank Jones, and from playing in Detroit-area bands. Sheila Jordan was born in Detroit in 1928 and was raised in western Pennsylvania by her grandparents. At age thirteen she returned to Detroit to live with her mother.²⁰ Barry Harris, born in Detroit in 1929, began studying piano at age four and even as a child, his mother drew a distinction: "You got to play church music or you got to play jazz."²¹ Betty Carter was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1930, but went to school in Detroit. She credited a combination of church and school as the sources of her earliest musical education. Carter studied piano at the Detroit Conservatory of Music and was student director of her high school a capella choir. After placing second in a local amateur talent contest, Carter started playing professionally at sixteen.²²

Pepper Adams's parents, despite having degrees from the University of Michigan, were "desperately poor" by the time their son was born in 1930 in nearby Highland Park, Michigan. Adams grew up in Rochester, New York, but at the age of sixteen, he was in high school in Detroit. Upon his return he was introduced to the Detroit Jazz scene by some friends of Oscar Pettiford.²³ Tommy Flanagan was born in Detroit in 1930, and grew up with a piano in his house and older siblings who practiced and played several instruments. Kenny Burrell was born in Detroit in 1931 to a working-class family that passed on a love of music. His mother introduced him to her Baptist choir and managed to scrape together fifty-cents each Saturday morning for his piano lessons. His family could not afford the expensive saxophone he wanted, so his older brother helped him buy a guitar, and taught 12-year-old Kenny how to play it.²⁴ In the late 1940s as teenagers, Adams, Flanagan, and Burrell played in a big band led by the Detroit saxophonist Lucky Thompson, who secured his professional reputation as a "masterful soloist" performing and recording Bebop in New York and Los Angeles.²⁵

In *Swing to Bop*, Ira Gitler noted that there were "cells" or "enclaves" of young

beboppers in New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago, but a complex network of musical practice sites and performance spaces existed in Detroit.²⁶ Historian Eric Lott has suggested that one cannot absorb the philosophy, style, and politics of the Bebop phenomenon “without its social reference,” nor understand “New York at that time without consulting the music.”²⁷ Similarly, one cannot separate the Detroit Bebop scene from its social context in the city. As Robin Kelley reminds us, “To know how the music changed and developed, we need to understand how the community worked.”²⁸ The Jazz community in black Detroit bristled with experimental energy, and established musicians from New York City and elsewhere frequently played, and stayed in the city, profoundly influencing local musicians and audiences alike.

Throughout the 1940s the Blue Bird Inn was the center of Detroit’s Jazz activity and the premier stop for the touring Bebop masters.²⁹ The Blue Bird was a black-owned, working-class bar in the heart of the West Side black community where six nights a week the house band would play “Modern Jazz.” Its clientele included people just getting off work or on the way to a factory late shift, enjoying a drink and some great Jazz while still in their overalls with their lunch pails atop the bar. Pepper Adams summed up the atmosphere of this “working man’s bar”: “Nothing phony about it in any way. No pretensions and great swinging music.”³⁰ Tommy Flanagan called the Blue Bird Inn “a beautiful club with all the atmosphere that is not in Detroit anymore.” Flanagan said, “I never saw a place like it even in New York. It had a neighborhood atmosphere and all the support a jazz club needed. Everyone who loved jazz in Detroit came, and it was a very inspired group that played there.”³¹ Barry Harris recalled, “When I was a young cat, I used to go to the Blue Bird and stand out front; the bandstand was right by the front window. So I’d knock on the window and . . . I’d run in and play a tune [on the house piano] and run back out.”³²

Milt Jackson played in a band in 1945 that backed up John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie in Detroit, after which Gillespie hired Jackson to play with him in New York City.³³ When Parker and Gillespie first came to Detroit, Betty Carter remembered, “I was underage so I just forged my birth certificate. I was able to get into the bars where they were playing.”³⁴ Sheila Jordan was a member of a vocal trio that sang “vocalese,” or verbal interpretations of Bebop melodies and improvisations, accompanying “Diz” and “Bird” when they came to town.³⁵ By the late 1940s when Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Max Roach played at Paradise Valley nightclubs such as the Paradise Bowl, the Three Sixes, and Club Zombie, Tommy Flanagan used to listen outside the side door or stand inside the front doorway where he “could see right on the bandstand.”³⁶ Once, when they were underage musicians, Flanagan and Kenny Burrell painted on fake mustaches and sneaked into a club where Burrell sat in with Bird.³⁷ Big-name musicians also

played at the Paradise Theater and the Paradise Club, and throughout the city at Baker's Keyboard Lounge, Club Juana, El Sino, and the Rouge Lounge, a combination bar and bowling alley. Other establishments included Detroit's Masonic Temple where Art Tatum played a 1945 solo concert, and a Detroit skating rink where Charlie Parker played with a string section.³⁸

In 1945 when Bebop first hit Detroit, Hank Jones recalled, it "was technically superior," with its players executing "many more chord progressions, and at a much faster pace." So many "new ideas were developing. . . . It required a lot more study on my part than I had been doing up to that point, so to that end I began to do more woodshedding so I could properly adapt myself to the style." Barry Harris, who also spent many hours in the metaphorical woodshed, perfecting techniques and brainstorming ideas, remembered "about 40 youngsters 14 and 15 years old—all trying to play Bebop, the hardest music ever created." Harris recalled, "We used to jam all day long at my house, which was kind of like an all-day rehearsal studio." Tommy Flanagan "practiced a lot on the old piano at home, or by woodshedding at other people's houses." He recalled, "There were a lot of sessions going on in Detroit at that time. . . . There was a real workshop feeling going on all over, with these all day kinds of things. Nobody got tired. There was always something to learn."³⁹ Flanagan saw Art Tatum play piano in a basement up the street from the Paradise Theater, while Pepper Adams attended Friday and Saturday after-hours sessions at the West End Hotel.⁴⁰ Kenny Burrell sat in on midnight-to-4:00 a.m. sessions at the Club Sudan during the late 1940s, and through the early 1950s Detroit hosted local "workshops and jam sessions four-five nights a week." According to Burrell, "There was a lot of interaction, a lot of playing, and an exchanging of ideas."⁴¹

The music, style, and philosophy of Bebop musicians critiqued the ideological justifications used to naturalize an economic system that perpetuated racial and social inequities. In the same manner, the interracial friendships, professional collaborations, and romantic relationships in the bop scene publicly flouted the dominant values by violating white racial taboos. For example, in high school Sheila Jordan's principal called her into his office and told her, "You look nice, you dress nice; why do you have to hang around with the colored girls?" Jordan added, "The police were always stopping us. If we were in a car with some young black musicians or friends . . . we were constantly being stopped." Once when Jordan was 18 years old, she drove to Belle Island for a picnic with a white female classmate and two black males, one of whom was Jordan's boyfriend. The police stopped them, falsely accused them of smoking marijuana, and took them to the police station. Public school officials, police, and state authorities understood their job to be to maintain the city's racialized social boundaries. Jordan recalled, "I knew that I wasn't wrong," even though the plainclothes detectives at the station "would

try to brainwash me and tell me that it was wrong for me to hang out with black people.” Jordan felt a close affinity with African Americans, who understood what she was trying to do musically. Coming from a poor white family in a small coal-mining town, Sheila Jordan knew what it meant to be “looked down upon” and “prejudiced against.” “I felt very close to Black people when I was growing up, to the point where I really wanted to be Black. I felt Black,” Jordan admitted. “I got very turned off of White people when I was young, ’cause of their biased attitude, ’cause of their sickness, you know.”⁴²

For his part, Pepper Adams was never accepted by the local white Jazz community and did not seem to fit in with the white Detroit players who felt Bebop meant imitating the riffs of popular musicians such as Stan Getz, or reproducing every bop cliché. These narrow-minded musicians, who could not even comprehend Adams’s harmonic experimentations, thought listening to Duke Ellington was corny and old-fashioned. Adams eventually gravitated toward the black bop musicians, who “had enough breadth of vision to see that . . . [he] was trying to make [his] own synthesis” out of different musical styles.⁴³ “There was a very active and working white jazz scene in Detroit,” Adams recalled, even though “many of the rest of us were not working that regularly.”⁴⁴ This “ofay, cool clique,” he explained, “sewed up practically all the good gigs. I never worked with this bunch because they put me down for mixing with the ‘wrong people’ . . . They were the kind who don’t like to ‘mix with colored folks.’” As a result, Adams recalled, “More often than not, I was the only white cat in any band I worked in.”⁴⁵

In the 1940s Detroit’s American Federation of Musicians’ Local 5 was one of only two integrated musicians’ union locals in the country, the other being New York’s Local 802. Apparently, however, Detroit’s amalgamated Local 5 could not bridge the racial divide in such a stubbornly segregated city. Moreover, in the late 1940s the clique of white musicians who thought playing Bebop meant taking heroin attempted to recruit Adams. He claimed, “There was a fair amount of drug usage in the black area as well, but it was never passed upon me there.”⁴⁶ Along the same lines, Sheila Jordan preferred hanging out with the black students because “all the White teenagers in school were going to parties and getting smashed out of their minds . . . [and driving] like maniacs.”⁴⁷

African American popular music articulated an alternative, non-Anglo worldview, and provided a wellspring of innovative cultural ideas. Throughout the African American community, the city’s thriving bars and clubs were mirrored by informal settings where local musicians furthered their education, at both public and private learning sites. Young players engaged in extracurricular “blowing” sessions with friends and in small combos or dance bands, after first gaining hands-on knowledge in school orchestras and learning instrumental technique and music theory at their public high schools. In particular, the excellent courses in

composition, orchestration, harmony, and theory at the prestigious Lewis Cass Technical High School touched the lives of Alma Smith, Sheila Jordan, Doug Watkins, J. C. Heard, Donald Byrd, Paul Chambers, Oklahoma-born, Detroit-raised Howard McGhee, and Wardell Gray. Kansas City-born, Detroit-raised tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell claimed that if students “wanted to take music, specifically, they went down to Cass Tech, which . . . had what for that time was a very advanced music program. I would say it would compare [favorably] with some of the college programs of today.”⁴⁸ Bassist Paul Chambers took two extra years to graduate from Cass Tech so that he could study music as much as possible. For him, “the curriculum took up a whole day of music,” . . . and he recalled, “we’d have the first period chamber music, second period full orchestra, third either harmony or counterpoint and rudiments; then came piano and the academic classes.”⁴⁹ Northeastern High School, where Barry Harris and bassist Ernie Farrow were enrolled, also offered a fine music program, as did Northern High School, which trained Tommy Flanagan, Bess Bonnier, Roland Hanna, and Sonny Red.

In the Paradise Valley area, Sidney Miller High School, in the 1930s—the first in the city with a majority black student body—provided outstanding music courses, as well as classical and swing student bands. Its alumni included Milt Jackson, his bassist brother, Alvin Jackson, bassist Al McKibbin, and Yusef Lateef, as well as younger players Pepper Adams, Art Mardigan, Frank Rosolino, Lorenzo Lawson, and Kenny Burrell. At Miller High, Lateef learned to read and compose music, and he “began studying tenor saxophone as a member of the school concert band.” At the same time, he also sought “private lessons with alto saxophonist Teddy Buckner, then residing in Detroit.” He left school to work with a local dance band, with whom he “learned to improvise,” playing Detroit Milt Buckner’s arrangements, but after a year he “went back to finish high school.”⁵⁰ Even though the student body at Miller High School was predominantly black, the music theory and composition instructor during the 1940s was a Mexican American named Louis Cabrera. Milt Jackson played in the school’s fourteen-piece dance band, which Cabrera would take to other schools as a professional unit, and each student musician was paid seven dollars a gig.⁵¹ Cabrera served as the “director” of this “stage band,” plus he conducted the school concert band. Kenny Burrell played in the dance band as a bassist, and in the concert band as a percussionist, which led to his “first conducting lessons,” and which brought out his “leadership skills.”⁵² In particular, his work in the school’s big band helped him with his “reading and conception.”⁵³

Burrell believed that Cabrera was “more than just ‘another music appreciation teacher.’” “Not only did he furnish us with a thorough grounding in the academic aspects of music,” Burrell explained, “but he also provided us with the philosophy that our music should be a paying thing.” Cabrera encouraged his pupils to get the practical experience of performing in clubs, ensuring that “those of his students

who worked professionally got credits which were applied towards their classwork.” Cabrera also explained “the financial aspects of their craft, warning them against . . . exploitation by clubowners,” and telling them how he had personally overcome such situations.⁵⁴ In addition, Cabrera, who “played pop music and some jazz” as a bassist, called Kenny Burrell as a substitute on gigs, recommended Burrell for the All City High School Concert Band, taught him private bass lessons, (including the French system of bowing), gave him special private music theory lessons during and after school, which improved his confidence and musicianship, and even advised him on “how to behave, [and] how to be healthy in terms of diet and nutrition.” Finally, Burrell recalled that, Cabrera invited former students back to Miller High School, so when Milt Jackson and Al McKibbin were in town with Dizzy’s big band, they “would come in and play with the kids in the orchestra, hang out and give [them] pointers.”⁵⁵ The relationship between Louis Cabrera and his students demonstrated the presence of Mexican Americans, and of African American-Mexican–American dialogue and cooperation in Detroit, which in turn nudges Jazz history beyond black-and-white analyses.

The budding bop musicians received a thorough public education from Cabrera, and from African American high school teachers such as Ernest Rodgers, Orville Lawrence, and James Tatum. They received private lessons from local musicians Billy Mitchell, Wardell Gray, and others.⁵⁶ Mentors provided informal apprentices with musical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual support, helping them display greater self-confidence and maturity. For example, pianist Barry Harris deserves credit as an invaluable educator of many Detroit musicians. Pepper Adams called him “an informed pedagogue” who “influenced [many] youngsters in right playing and right living.”⁵⁷ Adams, who learned much from “Uncle Barry” when they played together in the Blue Bird house band, argued that the tutelage Harris provided his protégés “gave them a tremendous educational advantage.” Indeed, he ran his students through drills until they could fluently rattle off minor, major, and augmented scales before he even began to teach them about chords, theory, and harmony.⁵⁸ Yusef Lateef called Harris “a brilliant man” who was often referred to as “the High Priest,” adding, “I learned more about improvisation from him than any one person I studied with.”⁵⁹ As Harris recounted, “My house was a classroom. We could practice all we wanted.”⁶⁰ As he put it, “In those days, most of the cats in town would come by my house because I was like a step ahead of them.” Harris even developed his own theory of improvisation based on “the fact that horn players use chords instead of scales for improvising.” He dubbed it “Seventh Scales theory, and it’s about cutting the number of changes in half for soloists.” Harris related that when Miles Davis brought his first quintet to town in 1955, John Coltrane “had heard about all these young cats from Detroit playing so good, so he came by

and wrote down all [Harris's] rudiments."⁶¹ In 1950s Detroit, Betty Carter explained, "We never thought about a hit record. We thought about learning . . . about developing . . . learning how to get better."⁶²

These indispensable educational networks anchored black Detroit's contemporary musical infrastructure, and thus were woven into the cultural and social fabric of the city. As part of the larger context for Detroit's production of so many Jazz modernists, the exceptional music programs in the city's public schools forged a strong foundation, educating "future players and listeners alike." The postwar industrial boom, along with "the joint activities of audiences and musical entrepreneurs," provided "challenging jobs" for musicians. Finally, a support system of more experienced mentor-musicians kept the Jazz scene tied to the local African American community, while visiting musicians, from the bravura boppers to Lester Young and Billie Holiday, kept Detroit connected to the broader Jazz world. Along the way, Detroiters also stayed in touch with a long tradition of African American dancing. For example, when Bird played the Forest Club in 1950, people "would dance separately from each other" in "the most creative dancing," and "the number of dancers always outnumbered the listeners around the bandstand." When Bird dueled Illinois Jacquet in a saxophone battle at the Graystone Ballroom in 1953, "the floor was packed" with people dancing in half-time to his uptempo attack.⁶³ That same year in Hollywood, Stan Kenton complained to *Down Beat* that "the kids . . . can't seem to get going on rhythm numbers . . . they're afraid to get out there on the floor."⁶⁴ Detroit's young people, in contrast, continued to practice, and produce, African American vernacular dance. As Barry Harris recalled, "Detroit was heavy. I'll tell you how heavy it was. The dancers there were so good that if a drummer came into town with a band and he turned the beat around, they'd stop dancing and say, 'What's wrong with this cat? He stopped the beat!' They were so hip."⁶⁵

Music historian Samuel Floyd argued that "Dance, Drum, and Song" are "central to the black cultural experience," and that black dance expresses "movements that mirror the rhythms of all the African-American music genres."⁶⁶ Cultural critic and journalist Albert Murray described "the dance hall as [a] temple" in which thrives "the most comprehensive elaboration and refinement of communal dancing."⁶⁷ Similarly, Gena Dagel Caponi and other cultural theorists have argued that black dance contains intellectual properties, preserves an improvisatory aesthetic, and transmits a communal worldview.⁶⁸ Dance scholar Jacqui Malone suggested that African American vernacular dance affirms and celebrates life, "even in the face of tremendous adversity." It is "a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression" that "teaches the unity of mind and body and regenerates mental and physical power." Black dance is marked by, among other things, "a certain ecstasy of motion," coupled with a "concern for elegance" and for

the originality of one's movements.⁶⁹

The Detroit cohort thus played an important role in the maintenance, creation, circulation, and reception of African American expressive culture, from Swing to Bebop to Hard Bop. In the process, black Jazz musicians and fans asserted themselves in an urban public sphere segregated by both race and class in a kind of low-intensity culture war. Orchestra Hall, for example, had been built in 1919 specifically for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, but the orchestra moved to the Masonic Hall in 1939. Beginning in 1941, the 2,000 to 3,000-seat Orchestra Hall reopened as the Paradise Theater, and began featuring Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines, and the finest African American swing orchestras.⁷⁰ African Americans made their presence felt in late September 1944, when local radio disc jockey Bill Randle—whose program “Strictly Jive” enjoyed “a large following”—selected Milt Jackson to play the first Jazz concert held at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).⁷¹ Considered “a beacon of culture” since its founding in 1885, and “a temple of art” since its move to a white marble Beaux-Arts building across from the Italian Renaissance-style Detroit Public Library in 1927, the DIA helped the city “create an environment of culture and refinement.”⁷²

The institute's Garden Court displayed Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's two socialist-themed “Detroit Industry” frescos, so it was a logical venue to host Jazz events, forums for left-wing authors, and political figures. Each of Bill Randle's concerts sold out the museum's 1,150-seat auditorium, but after ten shows featuring Milt Jackson's quartet, the Four Sharps, according to Milt Jackson, “They threw me out because they said the audience was a little ‘rowdy’; they left marijuana cigarettes in the john.” It was not until five years later in September 1949 that Jazz returned to the Detroit Institute of Arts when pianist Harold McKinney organized a “Moods and Idioms” concert there, featuring contemporary music by his band, the Bopateers, and by pianist Barry Harris's orchestra, as well as classical music by pianist Roland Hanna. This show, which also included professional dancers, launched a three-year Jazz concert series at the cultural landmark.⁷³

In the DIA's politicized cultural calculus, some black Jazz musicians gained a kind of social legitimacy as the city made tentative efforts to draw them in. Of course, the Detroit beboppers did not always seek the approval of the cultural critics in mainstream society. In fact, many of them sought to change society, or to at least work out in a lived context the unfinished attempt to chart a meaningful urban existence in the face of continuing white racism. Along this path, they kept the flame of Modern Jazz alive during the postwar period, and some, like Yusef Lateef, turned to black nationalism and eventually to a musical internationalism. At 18 years old, Lateef toured professionally with Hot Lips Page, Roy Eldridge, and Lucky Millinder, and with Dizzy Gillespie in 1949. After changing his family name, William Huddleston, to the stage name “Bill Evans,” he changed it again in 1950

after converting to the Ahmadiyya sect of Islam.⁷⁴ The Nation of Islam, founded in Detroit's Paradise Valley neighborhood in 1931, had already gained many adherents by 1953 when Malcolm X became the assistant minister of the Nation of Islam's Detroit Temple Number One. In 1954 Malcolm moved to Harlem's Temple Number Seven and by the end of the decade had risen to national prominence.⁷⁵ The disciplined, dignified Black Muslims represented a more explicitly political corollary to the Jazz artists' musical activities.

On the whole, the Motor City musical milieu nurtured a range of African American expressive forms and practices and community-based cultural work. For instance, around 1953 while still a student at the city's Wayne State University, Kenny Burrell formed the New Music Society, the first community-based musicians' cooperative in Detroit. Burrell became its first president, and soon the group began a working relationship with the World Stage, a 150-seat, student-organized theater-in-the-round located just north of the Wayne State campus in Highland Park. The World Stage produced plays by William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Tennessee Williams, and other modern playwrights. It also hosted weekly jam sessions by Burrell, Pepper Adams, and other local Jazz musicians that drew a supportive, respectful, and even reverent audience comprised mostly of college students. Representing over 5,000 members, the New Music Society held jam sessions at the Blue Bird Inn and conducted a series of Jazz performances at the DIA in 1954 and 1955. With Oliver Shearer as president and Yusef Lateef as vice president, it also put on free public concerts every other Sunday throughout 1955. Detroit drummer Louis Hayes, who got involved in the World Stage productions through an older musician who befriended him, recalled, "After I played there a few times, these guys who I felt were my heroes really accepted me. That put me in another environment." Music historian Lars Bjorn contended, "The New Music Society lasted at least through 1956 and became an important forerunner of organizing efforts in the late 1960s."⁷⁶

Detroit consistently facilitated the evolution and exploration of bop-inspired Jazz. As Billy Mitchell concluded, "It was the place for Jazz. It was the place for creative Jazz music. . . . It was a training ground for everyone, and Detroit was a hip musical town with hip music people. It believed in music at that time, Detroit did."⁷⁷ For example, from 1951 to 1954 tenor saxophonist Billy Mitchell's house band at the Blue Bird Inn "accompanied national Jazz [artists] who appeared there," and thereby anchored the city's Jazz scene. This "world class" quintet featured the stylist Thad Jones, "Hard Bop's most harmonically daring trumpeter," at the top of his game. Charles Mingus called Jones "the greatest trumpet player" that he had "ever heard in this life," and trumpeter Miles Davis was moved to tears "when he heard Thad play." Davis, who lived in Detroit from autumn 1953 to February 1954, played the Blue Bird frequently. Alvin Jackson's house band in the mid-1950s

featured Yusef Lateef and Tommy Flanagan, then Barry Harris. Hard boppers Horace Silver, Miles Davis, Jimmy Smith, J. J. Johnson, and Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers performed at the Blue Bird in 1958 and 1959.⁷⁸ Throughout the 1950s, show bars—where an elevated, often elaborate stage or bandstand is directly behind the bar—became popular in Detroit, most notably Klein's, the Frolic Show Bar, and especially the Crystal Show Bar, which presented touring artists Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Coleman Hawkins, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and hard boppers Gene Ammons and the Max Roach-Clifford Brown Quintet.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, despite this rich history, somehow Detroit remains underrated as a major contributor to Modern Jazz and Bebop.

One reason is that although Detroit consistently produced "highly accomplished modernists," by the late 1950s it "remained handicapped by the lack of major record labels, and this eventually forced young aspiring players to leave for New York or the West Coast." After 1945 Howard McGhee, Wardell Gray, Teddy Edwards, Alma Smith, Gerald Wilson, and Al McKibbon all moved to Los Angeles. In addition, Detroit became "one of the main feeders of talent to New York Hard Bop groups."⁸⁰ Billy Mitchell and Milt Jackson moved to New York City in the late 1940s; Sheila Jordan and Betty Carter moved there in 1951; Kenny Burrell, Tommy Flanagan, Elvin Jones, and Pepper Adams in 1956; and Barry Harris and Yusef Lateef in 1960. As Adams argued, "In Detroit the level of musicianship was *so* goddamn high that you really had to know what you were doing and be able to do it well, in order to even have a chance of surviving and getting any kind of work."⁸¹ While visiting bands recruited some in this talented generation of Detroit Jazz artists, the city's very profusion of talent created such a surplus that limited opportunities drove others to the Bebop mecca.⁸²

According to Pepper Adams, "There were so many good cats in Detroit, there wasn't enough work to go round."⁸³ Regarding Jazz employment circa 1956, Tommy Flanagan recalled, "I really exhausted all the gigs there."⁸⁴ He went on matter-of-factly, "Nothing was happening in Detroit anymore. Nobody was paying any money."⁸⁵ By 1960 "the music scene in Detroit beame so slow that [Yusef Lateef] had no choice but to go to New York."⁸⁶ Once in Manhattan, established fellow Detroiters like Milt Jackson helped the newcomers find work and housing. After Tommy Flanagan found a place to stay, bassist Doug Watkins, alto saxophonist Sonny Red, trombonist Curtis Fuller, and drummer Louis Hayes arrived from Detroit, and they all "moved into the same building, thus creating a tight colony of Motor City transplants." As Barry Harris broke down the "if-you-can-make-it-there" dynamic: "Generally, you came to New York to get the finishing touches. Cats who could play good would come from someplace else, but they couldn't play as hip as the cats in New York. . . . You'd have to sit around and be ostracized until you got it together, and then you became a New Yorker

yourself.”⁸⁷

Back in Michigan, the decline of the once-thriving Jazz scene was undoubtedly linked to the changing economics of the city, particularly to the shifting stability of Detroit’s expanding African American population. During this period white residents fled to the rapidly developing Detroit suburbs where new automobile plants, a sprawling freeway system, and the nation’s first shopping mall, the Northland Center, were built. A late 1950s recession in the auto industry led to the closing of city plants, and many black workers suffered disproportionately from corporate downsizing, parts outsourcing, and chronic unemployment. On the assembly line and the plant floor, low seniority black workers were debilitated by automation and eventually demoralized by deindustrialization.⁸⁸ Crippling urban renewal, including the 1959 construction of the Chrysler Freeway section of Interstate 75, which demolished Paradise Valley, the oldest established black enclave in Detroit, coupled with competition from Jump Blues and Rhythm ’n Blues, as well as the departure of the bop cohort, all hastened the end of the city’s postwar “golden age of jazz.”⁸⁹

Yet there is still room in the critical historiography of Detroit for more humanistic work that complements the social scientific emphasis on hate strikes, race riots, housing decline, racial discrimination, white flight, and the flight of industrial capital. In other words, there is room for more research on Detroit foregrounding African Americans as active historical subjects before the era of Motown. Here rather than urban, labor, business, or even social history, cultural and music history can reframe multiple figures and bring them into sharper focus, especially by using a more organically grassroots, less macro-demographic notion of community as an analytical lens. As novelist Ralph Ellison wrote in 1953, “True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group . . . each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.”⁹⁰ Coming up in the profession, the Detroit musicians had to discover their own voices beyond simply idolizing their favorite players. In Tommy Flanagan’s words: “We imitated people a lot at first, but . . . you started to develop something of your own, a little identity.”⁹¹ As a young player, Kenny Burrell began using horn soloist techniques and “harmonic conceptions” to get the most out of his guitar, just like two of his main influences, Charlie Christian and Oscar Moore. Burrell understood that “every instrument has limitations . . . but if you have a strong enough feeling, it will come through.” Eventually, Burrell blended his intelligence, sensitivity, and free-flowing ideas to create his own distinctive, versatile style.⁹² “Fortunately, in jazz,” to his delight, “there is the freedom to be yourself.”⁹³

"I'd like to help establish jazz as a pure, respected American cultural form," Yusef Lateef declared in 1958. "I'd like the listener to be elevated morally by listening. . . . I'd like the sounds I play to uplift the audience."⁹⁴ Lateef was a searcher, an aural painter, and a talented reed instrumentalist who mastered everything from bamboo flutes to North Indian and West African oboes, and whose ensembles practiced group improvisation while exploring Middle Eastern and Asian rhythms, instruments, and concepts.⁹⁵ Jazz arrangements allow for individual solos within a larger improvisational structure, resulting in what Milt Jackson described as a "flexible interplay, a spontaneous unity."⁹⁶ The Detroiters illustrate this dynamic of individuals working in unison, yet giving each other personal freedom, in the finest tradition of African American expressive culture. On Yusef Lateef's 1961 album, *Eastern Sounds*, the tenor saxophonist also played oboe and flute, and he was joined by Lex Humphries on drums, and by fellow Detroit natives Barry Harris on piano, and Ernie Farrow on bass and rabat. The quartet smoothly swings together, brilliant by turns as each soloist says his piece before fluidly folding back into the groove, particularly on the Lateef originals "Blues for the Orient" and "Snafu." On the latter song, the group sustains an entrancing, impassioned rhythmic insistence. On the ballads "Don't Blame Me," "Love Theme from *Spartacus*," and "Love Theme from *The Robe*," the players achieve an achingly beautiful lyricism. Barry Harris's resonant sound is sparse, his improvisations introspective and "imaginative, yet energetic."⁹⁷ This recording's spiritually pleasing, emotionally moving instrumental music explores a range of human feelings through melancholy melodies; contemplative tenor sax ruminations; cerebral, wistful, and romantic flute lines; and refined-yet-assertive piano statements.

Regarding the avant-garde artists of the 1960s, and their free Jazz styles, Lateef later remarked: "You've heard the saying, 'Knowledge will set you free.' This is what I think. Knowledge of form, of new approaches to composition, will give us new music, a music that is fresh and vital."⁹⁸ Detroit drummer Elvin Jones helped transform "the fundamental role of the drummer" from that of a time-keeping accompanist to "one of an equal collaborative improviser."⁹⁹ In his work with John Coltrane between 1960 and 1966, as well as with his own ensembles, Jones developed complex rhythmic experimentations. Jones, like bassist Charles Mingus, expanded the ideas of Bebop pioneers, eventually shattering the conventional rules of music by emancipating the rhythm instruments from their traditional supporting role to one of creative equality. The "avant-garde revolution," like the Bebop revolution, represented in Frank Kofsky's words "the musical expression of Negro discontent," and its musicians merged protest with praxis while remaining "astute politically" and "outspoken."¹⁰⁰

“By the middle of the 1960s,” wrote historian Eric Porter, black musicians were contemplating nationalist ideas, but “they also had to contend with the growing popularity of rock and roll and Soul music and the disappearance of Jazz performance spaces.” A “Black Arts imperative . . . developed in the Jazz community,” as seen in cooperative organizations such as the Jazz Composers’ Guild in New York, the Black Artists’ Group in St. Louis, the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago, and the Creative Musicians’ Association in Detroit. Horace Tapscott created the Underground Musicians’ Union, which later became the Union of God’s Musicians and Artists Ascension, as well as the Pan Afrikan People’s Arkestra in Los Angeles.¹⁰¹ Daniel Widener’s research shows how southern California musicians, artists, and writers engaged in a sustained black liberation struggle through vehicles such as the Watts Writers Workshop, with its affiliated repertory theater group, as well as Tapscott’s avant-garde activism, which included presenting his “self-determination music” in public concerts at parks, festivals, and churches.¹⁰² As African American artists reimagined their own nation within the nation, out of the vibrant communities of the Motor City came the African American writer, publisher, and poet laureate of Detroit, Dudley Randall, who created the black-owned Broadside Press, which brought poetry to the people and opened the canon of American literature to African American writers Audre Lord, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Melba Joyce Boyd, and others.¹⁰³ Yet despite this impressive literary scene, Detroit did not produce an equally significant 1960s Jazz scene, especially compared to its prominent place in the Bebop and Hard Bop eras. Still, since Detroiters formed both the Creative Musicians’ Association and the Broadside Press, they also contributed to the emerging Black Arts Movement.

In 1967 the economically hard-hit, predominantly black 12th Street neighborhood in Northwest Detroit erupted in violence after years of police harassment and brutality, poor housing, and shriveling economic opportunities. Looting and fires spread, and five days of rioting and clashes with policemen and National Guard troops left forty-three people dead, 1,189 injured, and over 7,000 arrested.¹⁰⁴ The next year, 1968, saw the release of *The Blue Yusef Lateef*, a Bluesy Soul Jazz LP distinguished by two standout tracks featuring Gospel vocals by “The Sweet Inspirations” and heartfelt harmonica: “Juba Juba,” a lament based on a Mississippi prison song and punctuated by a chant of “freedom,” as well as “Back Home.” In 1969 Yusef Lateef’s *Detroit, Latitude 42° 30' Longitude 83°* album represented an appreciative testimonial for the city, with tracks inspired by “Eastern Market,” “Belle Isle,” and “Woodward Avenue,” and featuring fellow Detroiters Thad Jones and Hugh Lawson, as well as Snooky Young, New York *conguero* Ray Barretto, and a string quartet. This genre-fusing recording created a dense soundscape with a down-home blues feel, far-out scatting and baby-like crying, a walking, syncopating electric bass, a fuzzy-toned electric guitar, a funky flute, and a bleating,

talking, singing, soulful tenor saxophone—like a post-riot, pre-Blaxploitation movie score to modern urban African American life, about Detroit, though recorded in New York. In 1969 Lateef also composed his first major orchestral work, “Blues Suite,” and in 1970, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra performed it.¹⁰⁵

JAZZ PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

In a 1970 *Time* magazine special issue on “Black America,” Ralph Ellison published an essay, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks,” in which he makes the case that Africa’s descendants played “a complex and confounding role in the creation of American history and culture.”¹⁰⁶ The Detroiters injected themselves into the national intellectual and cultural conversation, and due to their formal and informal musical educations developed the idea of Jazz musicians as philosophers, artists, and modernists in society. Specifically, Kenny Burrell cited Duke Ellington as a major influence, as did Pepper Adams, who studied Ellington’s compositions as he searched for his own personal voice. Kenny Burrell argued that Duke Ellington “was much more than just a musician. He was an Afro-American social commentator, an American artist whose cultural contribution of approximately 3,000 compositions was enormous. He was one of the most significant men of the 20th century.” As Burrell asserted, by presenting a distinctly American sound “in symphonic sketches, ballets, and extended works,” Ellington “forged the fusion of Jazz and classical musics way back in the ’40s,” and “developed Jazz into a high art” in the process. Describing Ellington’s philosophy, Burrell declared, “One of the basic ideas is to be yourself. Everyone has a unique artistic personality that can be developed, nurtured, and cultivated.” In short, Ellington represented “a lesson in how to survive as an individual in a society that doesn’t care too much for art, while developing your thing.”¹⁰⁷ Ellington himself always considered his music part of a long legacy that reached back to Africa, yet remained attuned to ballroom dancers and concert hall listeners alike. He rejected labels such as “jazz” or “swing,” preferring the term “authentic Negro music,” and he once told Dizzy Gillespie that it had been a mistake to let them name the new modern style “Bebop.”¹⁰⁸

Whatever its critical categorization, practitioners of the Jazz craft were deeply affected by Bebop, especially by Charlie Parker, whom each of the Detroiters cited as a personal and professional inspiration. According to Yusef Lateef, “Charlie Parker’s influence pervaded everyone’s thinking who was really trying to evolve in their playing at that time.”¹⁰⁹ Pepper Adams called Parker “an autodidact” who was so well read, and whose “vocabulary was so good and so well ordered” that “he could sound like a college graduate.” Parker, “a constant experimenter,” used “the whole spectrum of language” available, seamlessly incorporating not only popular

tunes, but also interior “references to the whole history of twentieth-century music,” from classical and modern composers “to early Jazz [and] saxophone exercise books.”¹¹⁰ Sheila Jordan declared, “Bird is a sound, a musical road. His music made me aware of who I am; it showed me shortcuts to take in order to express myself musically, emotionally, and lyrically.”¹¹¹ According to Barry Harris, “[Parker] was a very special person. He threw off some kind of vibrations that made the cats play beyond themselves. . . . With Bird, it goes way beyond the notes or the music. It’s about the feeling.”¹¹² As Parker once observed, “Music is your own experience, your thoughts, your wisdom. If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn. They teach you there’s no boundary line to music. But, man, there’s no boundary line to art.”¹¹³ Parker, the philosopher who refused to be restrained by society, helped transform an entire genre of music and an entire generation of musicians in Detroit and across the United States.

The Detroit beboppers learned much from Parker and Ellington, as well as from high school teachers and private mentors, and several of them studied music theory and technique, among other subjects, at the collegiate level. Pepper Adams, who aspired to a career as a “literary type,” originally began playing Jazz in order to earn enough money to send himself to college. Adams eventually studied English in Detroit at Wayne State University for about two years; pianist Hugh Lawson studied music composition there; and Donald Byrd, the youngest member of this cohort, earned a bachelor’s degree in music from there in 1954, as well as a master’s degree in music education from the Manhattan School of Music. Howard McKinney attended Wayne State “for about a year taking courses in 16th century counterpoint and orchestra conducting,” but he “became disenchanted with the bias of the Music Department,” which “was violently opposed to anything but classical European music.”¹¹⁴ Kenny Burrell studied classical guitar, music theory, and composition at Wayne State University, graduating in 1955 with a bachelor’s degree in music, and he was later awarded an honorary doctorate from William Paterson University.¹¹⁵ Yusef Lateef attended the Institute of Musical Art in Detroit for a year and a half after finishing high school. In the early 1950s he took courses in music theory and composition at Wayne State, in addition to private flute lessons from Larry Teal. After leading quintets in Detroit and studying oboe with Ronald Odemark of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Lateef studied sociology at Columbia University before earning a bachelor’s degree in music in 1969, and a master’s degree in music education in 1970, both from the Manhattan School of Music. For his research on Western and Islamic education, he was awarded a doctorate in education from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1975.¹¹⁶

Some of these Detroit musicians came full circle later in their lives by teaching music in diverse educational settings. In 1979 at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Kenny Burrell developed the nation’s first regular college course

on the music and philosophy of Duke Ellington. After teaching his “Ellingtonia” class at Indiana University, the University of Nebraska, Grambling State University, Howard University, and Washington State University, Burrell became a professor in the departments of music and ethnomusicology at UCLA where, since 1996, he has also served as director of the Jazz Studies Program.¹¹⁷ Yusef Lateef taught courses at the Manhattan School of Music and Manhattan Community College on baroque theory and arranging, and on what he termed “autophysiopsychic music,” an African American tradition of music that “comes from one’s spiritual, physical, and emotional self.” Lateef also taught at the City University of New York and at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.¹¹⁸ Sheila Jordan, who studied Jazz theory with Lennie Tristano in Manhattan in the mid-1950s, taught classes and conducted vocal workshops as an artist-in-residence at the City College of New York in Harlem in the late 1970s.¹¹⁹ Hugh Lawson taught composition and Jazz improvisation at the Henry Street Settlement in New York, and Thad Jones taught at the collegiate level. Donald Byrd taught at the Manhattan High School of Music and Art, Rutgers University, Hampton University, North Carolina Central University, and Howard University. After earning a law degree from Howard University Law School and a doctorate in 1982 from Columbia University, Byrd served as chairman of the Department of Music at Howard.¹²⁰

In addition, some of the Detroit musicians criticized the American educational system for ignoring Jazz history, theory, and composition as worthy subjects of study. Thus Kenny Burrell decried ignorant and indifferent teachers, arguing that “if the educators, and the American people in general, were more concerned with their own culture, they would seek a more truthful picture of their own music.”¹²¹ Betty Carter blamed historically black colleges for not teaching the history of Jazz, and for not inviting musicians to conduct workshops. She claimed that although she had put on workshops at Northwestern University, Goddard College, Dartmouth College, Brown University, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Harvard University, she could not get work at Howard University, Fisk University, or Morehouse College.¹²² It upset Yusef Lateef that by the late 1970s his high school alma mater no longer taught instrumental music. Given the pivotal role of high school music teachers, future generations of talented young artists are impoverished educationally due to budget cuts at high schools that had previously presented opportunities for intensive instruction, as well as for gaining “more experiential knowledge.” As Lateef astutely observed, “Deleting music programs for financial reasons . . . prevents young people from learning what types of music they would like, which means when they grow up, they’ll accept as consumers whatever the media gives them. They’ll have no discretion and no means for measuring what’s best for them.”¹²³

CONCLUSION: EVERY VILLAGE HAS A SONG

The Detroiters expressed a mutual admiration for one another, and a “curious local loyalty.”¹²⁴ Trade journal articles mentioned a Detroit piano “school,” in which the “players share a common style and approach,” while Barry Harris and “a lot of [other] pianists from Detroit studied [church music] with” Reverend Holloway on the East Side. Coleman Hawkins “liked pianists from Detroit,” and he consistently worked with them over the years.¹²⁵ Detroit pianists included Johnny Allen, Willie Anderson, Terry Pollard, Bess Bonnier, Harold McKinney, Kenn Cox, and Alice McCleod—who studied classical music and as a youth played in the church band. McCleod was introduced to Jazz by her brother, Ernie Farrow, and she later married John Coltrane, and played in his quintet. The three main Detroit piano stylists—Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, and Barry Harris—lent much lyricism to the Hard Bop movement, and they have received the most acclaim.¹²⁶ Their comrade, pianist Hugh Lawson, also began in Detroit as a Bud Powell disciple, but ended up in New York after finding his own personal voicing and phrasing.¹²⁷ In Harris’s typology “the West Coast has a certain kind of softness, while the East Coast sounded more firm and powerful. . . . There was a Detroit sound too, but . . . it was lighter, fluffier.”¹²⁸ In 1955, after seeing Alvin Jackson’s house quintet at the Blue Bird Inn, *Down Beat* writer Barry Ulanov pondered “the way Detroiters accept Jazz.” He argued that “the Detroit approach” meant keeping “a warmth alive for the best of the old” without rejecting “any of the new,” and that “Detroit tastes” encompassed “nearly everything that’s around or has been.”¹²⁹ Pepper Adams, discussing his generation’s “similarity,” concluded that “they’re all players with a strong personal conception,” and a proficiency “in their knowledge of chords.”¹³⁰

As late as 1978, Barry Harris still maintained a Detroit residence, and as late as 1981 he still declared: “When they ask me what I am, I say that I’m a Detroiter, I’m not a New Yorker.”¹³¹ Nevertheless, in 1981 Harris began holding weekly workshops at the Jazz Forum, a loft space in Greenwich Village. Then in 1982 he created the Jazz Cultural Theater in the Chelsea neighborhood, where he and several other instructors taught over 200 students in fourteen music classes for five years, until they were forced to close due to a rent increase. Harris, who had won an amateur talent contest at Detroit’s Paradise Theater with his teenage band, created talent shows and concert programs that showcased original work by local singers, dancers, soloists, and bands.¹³² Through their music, mentorship, and pedagogy, grassroots cultural workers such as Barry Harris, Kenny Burrell, and Yusef Lateef maintained Afrocentric values and aesthetics, offering aspiring musicians and other local artists a positive vision of their collective heritage, history, and potential selves. By helping others gain the tools of self-expression and self-affirmation, the Detroiters manifested a deep commitment to the preservation of a distinctly

African American musical heritage in which individual “showiness” nevertheless “resurrected, strengthened, and dignified” the entire community.¹³³

Yusef Lateef’s 1975 song “I Be Cold” came from his teenage years, when he “used to tear down houses, break the wood up and sell it by the bushel in an effort to survive.” According to Lateef, his “didactic” music is “saying that one should exhibit humility . . . compassion . . . forbearance.” Lateef suggested that although man has biological needs, “he needs an aesthetic kind of nourishment, too. Things that nourish his Soul—his inner being. That’s what an artist contributes to a person.”¹³⁴ The musicians and the nightclub patrons alike needed “Soulful sustenance,” and they “retained,” in the words of Detroit poet Robert Hayden, “a sheltering spiritual beauty and dignity” despite the “disheartening circumstances” of their urban industrial environment.¹³⁵ As a generational cohort, they refused to allow poverty, urban renewal, systemic discrimination, or institutional barriers to hold them back. Instead, they succeeded as disciplined professionals, pursuing their passions with the courage to seize opportunities, the curiosity to explore new possibilities, and an insatiable desire to study and improve.

It is a testament to black Detroit that so many talented singers and instrumentalists were raised in musical homes, grew up in nurturing communities, played Gospel music in church, and began working professionally in bands at a young age. Betty Carter “credits the Detroit atmosphere for helping her during her formative years along the road to artistic fulfillment.”¹³⁶ Hank Jones insisted that his “homeboys” are “inventive players with flawless technique. They have that Detroit drive, the Motor City drive.”¹³⁷ Paul Chambers, who “was determined to make the bass a solo instrument” was a student of Barry Harris and exemplified these hard-working values, for “he practiced and practiced, hour upon hour.” A bandmate even once “waited on Paul to take a couple of girls out, and he wouldn’t stop practicing!”¹³⁸ This culture of learning seems overshadowed by the dominance of the Motown story, just as the humanistic cultural history of home-owning black families and workers supporting an empowering Jazz scene seems overshadowed by the broader declensional saga of working- and middle-class urban America. Yet an organic African American Jazz community flourished from the early 1940s through the late 1950s, producing Jazz creators, mentoring educators, and expressive cultural innovators who showed you could dance to Bebop, who added their unique and often poignant approaches to the postwar Hard Bop style, and who contributed to a national Black Arts Movement.

As historian Elsa Barkley Brown notes, Jazz is part of a musical tradition wherein each person expresses themselves individually, yet in relation to other members of the group. Accordingly, she argues, historians can gain from “Jazz training . . . a respect for each piece as unfinished, unended, waiting for the next musician to pick it up and play it a different way.” Of historians she writes, “If we

are good Jazz musicians, always we glory in a process which . . . does not assume that issues are settled, conversations ended, or scores finished.”¹³⁹ Rather than create a restricting master narrative or a false sense of closure, I have tried to stay true to the spirit of these two traditions: Jazz’s open-ended freedom and history’s knowledge production. In the end, the Bebop cohort helped secure the stature of African American expressive culture in Detroit and throughout American society. Indeed, the flame is carried by several Detroit public schools still offering vocal and instrumental music programs, band, choir, and dance; by contemporary live Jazz venues; and by an annual International Jazz Festival, for which Gerald Wilson performed “Detroit,” an original six-part suite commissioned by the city in 2009 to commemorate the festival’s 30th anniversary.¹⁴⁰ In short, the musical and cultural legacy of the “Renaissance City” musicians, while grounded in the 1940s and 1950s, continues to the present.

NOTES

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¹See, for example, Stephen W. Grable, “Racial Violence within the Context of Community History,” *Phylon* 42, no. 3 (1981): 278–79, and Cheri Y. Gay, *Detroit: Then and Now* (San Diego, CA, 2001), 5, 68.
²Robin D. G. Kelley, “In a Mist: Thoughts on Ken Burns’s Jazz,” *The Institute for Studies in American Music Newsletter* 30 (Spring 2001): 2.
³See Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).
⁴Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 71, 72, 75, 85.
⁵LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music That Developed From It* (New York, 1963), 188.
⁶Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York, 1970), 79, 81.
⁷Eric Lott, “Double V, Double-Time: Bebop’s Politics of Style,” *Callaloo* 11 (Summer 1988): 602.
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